

The Pelicantata

A Secular Cantata

Adapted from Roald Dahl's

The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me

music by Peter Ash

words by Donald Sturrock

How do you transform a classic children's story by Roald Dahl into a large-scale choral work that the venerable Stroud Choral Society might enjoy singing - even just a little? That was the somewhat alarming challenge that was presented to the librettist Donald Sturrock and me last year.

With the encouragement of Roald's wife, Licky, we accepted the challenge. The emotional connections were clear to us both. Donald and I have known the Dahl family for many years. Donald worked with Roald Dahl in the 1980s and wrote his biography *Storyteller* in 2010. We had also already written an opera, *The Golden Ticket* based on *Charlie and Chocolate Factory*. I knew that *The Giraffe...* was dedicated to Licky Dahl's three daughters, one of whom, Lorina, died tragically of a brain haemorrhage, aged 27, in 1990. As it happened, Lorina lived in a very narrow house, not unlike 'The Grubber' in Dahl's story, and even had a pet monkey for a time. I did not get to meet Lorina, but Donald and I are dear friends with the other dedicatees, her two sisters Neisha and Charlotte. I also remember well, one of the first conversations we had with Brough Girling, Chairman of the Stroud Choral Society, where he described his own friendship with Roald Dahl in relation to the Monkey's touching final 'song' which became the *a capella* chorale near the end of the work. So all of us felt a profound connection with the original story.

The working title was *The Giraffe Cantata*. Of course It needed to be fun and practical - not too long, expensive or difficult to execute. Stroud's Music Director, Huw Williams was totally supportive and collaborative in this context. He gently suggested we agree on an orchestration that was both appropriate to the character of the story, but that would maximise the possibility of future performances. The work lasting 35 minutes would fill half of a typical choral society programme - with the other half, perhaps some *Chandos Anthems* or

a *Nelson Mass*. That means we had a small string orchestra, 2 oboes, 1 bassoon 2 trumpets, timpani and organ. But I also wanted to colour the extraordinary three creatures in the story in a less traditional way. As I familiarised myself with my imagined new life at Hampshire House, I realised that some simple doublings of wind instruments might work rather well - Finally, The Giraffe became a contra-bassoon, The Pelly a cor anglais, and The Monkey a flugel horn.

Donald wisely suggested that the narrator should be the Duke of Hampshire's chauffeur who introduces the animals to the inhabitants of Hampshire House. We had previously discussed the possibility that the boy, Little Billy, who befriends the animals, might be the narrator. But we also knew that many Dahl stories rely on the reader 'becoming' the child in the story as they read. From Charlie to Matilda to James, a key factor in the way these stories create their effect is when each reader imagines they are the child, in this case Little Billy. Donald's brilliant solution allows any member of the audience to imagine they are Little Billy as well. Roald Dahl had a unique ability to re-imagine his childhood feelings and then present them to the reader/listener – I was struck by the moment in this story when The Pelly (a pelican) tries to persuade Little Billy to hop in to his open beak to go for a little ride! "I will *not* hop in," Billy says, "unless you swear on your honour you won't shut it once I am inside. I don't like small dark places." In this moment, I was taken right back to my own childhood when I first saw a pelican. I distinctly recall having had summoned in my own mind exactly this strange feeling of panic and dread, combined with a sense of the ridiculous.

But just how DO you tell a dramatic children's story with 100-plus potentially reluctant adult choristers? So I wondered what The Stroud Choral Society might look forward to singing. Verdi's *Requiem* perhaps? Or Handel's *Belshazzar*? I consulted Huw who kindly sent me a list of 'desert island' works he would take with him if his one luxury was The Stroud Choral Society! I tried to take inspiration from some of these and use them in my own way according to the dramatic situation. So, for example, in the opening chorus, *Hampshire House*, we thought of a stately Handelian quality using a Pevsner-like description of the Duke and Duchess's home - read Blenheim Palace – following by a pastoral depiction of the gardens and finishing with a fugue based on Dahl's description of Hampshire House with "677 windows in it (not counting the greenhouse) and all of them are filthy". Donald's words at the beginning of the fugue were spot-on, "All admire the fenestration, perhaps the finest in the nation..."

Many of Roald Dahl's stories have rhyming songs. Our solution to these 'set pieces' in our opera *The Golden Ticket* was to create a vaudeville-like parody where at the end of each scene in the factory, the Oompa Loompas step forward as the curtain falls behind them. Whilst they sing their 'morality' choruses about

what happens to children who misbehave, the naughty children get their sweet revenge behind the curtain; this also became a good way to create a scene change in Wonka's vast factory. With the animal songs in *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, the solution presented itself as another kind of practical opportunity. The Stroud Choral Society wanted to create a treble chorus. In this context, it seemed quite natural for the children (now renamed *The Minpins Chorus*) to be the animals. So there are four treble choruses (or semi-choruses for women): *Monkey Business*, *Pelly's Patented Beak*, *Giraffey's Magical Neck* and *Hunger is Catching!*

Another thing we discussed early in the process of creating the work was the possibility of audience participation. Of course, the musical tradition of the cantata has those chorale tunes that the audience would have sung. The obvious moment in our piece was when The Duchess, who was a famous opera singer, thinks her jewels have been stolen. Roald Dahl has her sing

*"My diamonds are over the ocean,
My diamonds are over the sea,
My diamonds were pinched from my bedroom,
Oh, bring back my diamonds to me." Etc.*

Initially, I found it too absurd to use this traditional Scottish folk song melody in the context of the rest of the work. But then I heard the Beatles version of the same tune and thought, "if it is good enough for the Beatles..." So, at this moment, the climax of the fugue "The Burglar in his Beak", the audience is invited to stand and sing the Duchess's music with the ladies in the chorus. At the same time, the fugue reaches its noisy climax and the burglar, who is trying to shoot his way out of the Pelly's beak, is well and truly captured by some policemen from the chorus. The Duchess faints with pleasure and some relief.

The Pelicantata is a dramatic secular cantata designed to appeal to all ages. Based on Roald Dahl's *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, it is a light-hearted celebration both of inspired teamwork and of the gift of friendship. It combines intense choral outbursts with a retelling of Dahl's characteristically whimsical tale. Near the end, there is a touching chorale. And there is a lot of absurdity and laughter too.

As for the title of the cantata, it was always there - like a beautiful, if somewhat over-sized - why didn't we notice it before? - pale green egg, hidden behind a huge 18th century wing chair in a corner of one of those Palladian rooms in Hampshire House. The egg finally hatched, the bird hopped up onto the window ledge and flew down to us. It innocently declared itself in "*The Burglar in His Beak*" in answer to the question "Who can save us?"